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Group-Based Songwriting with Adolescents in a Partial Hospitalization Program

Capstone Thesis

Lesley University

Jonathan Blake

April 9, 2018

Music Therapy

Donna Owens

Abstract

The growing field of music therapy aims to help those who suffer from an array of disorders, anxieties, and diagnoses using a wide collection of interventions and activities. Songwriting has been a useful tool for music therapists for many years. Popular interventions that utilize lyric replacement, fill-in-the-blank or Mad Lib style, and improvisational blues songwriting, have been very effective across a range of populations including children, adolescents, and the elderly. This project aims to bridge a gap in the research by implementing an original idea, which I devised, which encouraged clients to engage organically in a group setting. This intervention took place in a partial hospitalization program with adolescents ages 13-17. As the program is group-based, clients collaborated with their peers in the creation of a song. Groups were one hour in length, and the entire intervention took place during that time period. Over the course of this project, I found that these songwriting interventions elevated mood, facilitated emotions in a safe space, and promoted healthy group cohesion.

Group-Based Songwriting with Adolescents in a Partial Hospitalization Program

When people think of songwriting, they think of their favorite songs, their favorite artists, and the stories that they tell through music. They think about how they feel when they hear certain lyrics. They reminisce over where they were, or whom they were with. They remember singing along to such meaningful and powerful words. The song is humanity's most universal and enduring form of music, and it expresses the depth and breadth of human experience in all its magnificent diversity (Kratus, 2016). Thus, the therapeutic qualities of music are undeniable.

Songwriting can also be utilized as a way of healing. Music therapy (MT) can implement songwriting into interventions for those struggling with anxiety, depression, self-esteem, social skills, and emotional and behavioral difficulties (Tamplin, 2006). Ficken (1976) found songwriting to be an activity that could be internalized by clients in a group setting, and could lead to improvement in socially acceptable behavior and group cohesiveness. Results from these interventions show how important and effective songwriting can be.

This project will explore the role of music therapy in a partial hospitalization program (PHP) in Boston, Massachusetts. A PHP is typically one step down from inpatient care, and one step above general week to week counseling. While attending the program teens do not attend school. The duration is typically 10 days. The population is adolescents, ages 13-18, diagnosed with anxiety and depression.

Over the course of the semester, I implemented songwriting workshops with this population in a group setting. These interventions helped me to examine the effects of songwriting as a music therapy tool and measure outcomes of mood patterns. Specific groups developed will be explained in detail as this project unfolds. Essentially, as facilitator, I assisted the group in coming up with a theme they chose to explore. This theme ran throughout the

duration of the group as a catalyst for free writing and group-based songwriting. Understanding the use of song in therapy is where my research began. The song is humanity's most universal and enduring form of music, and it has expressed the depth and breadth of human experience in all its magnificent diversity (Kratus, 2016).

Upon completion of this project, I reflected on the differences of positive and negative effects on an array of individuals. An interesting component was to identify whether or not only those who are musically inclined benefitted from the process. For those who have any sort of musical background, songwriting interventions can be activities that revolve around musical and compositional skills, or they can use musical improvisation, which provide a nonverbal and nonthreatening means of disclosure and examination (Rogers, 1990). However, I anticipated that both musical and nonmusical individuals would, in some way, benefit throughout the duration of the project.

I hope that the reflections provided through documentation of the interventions will contribute to the clinical practice of expressive therapies. There is a gap in the methodology that I intend to bridge using an altered version of a standard model. I offer new exploration to the field of music therapy by addressing two questions: Can a new method of songwriting in a group setting facilitate musical expression in those who are non-musical? Can group cohesion and musical expression support elevated mood in adolescents struggling with depression and anxiety?

Literature Review

The literature reviewed for this project was useful while developing a method that could bridge a gap in the research. The goal in this process was to create an intervention that was original, yet could coincide with other methods. The articles referenced below exhibit a great deal of effort and thoughtfulness in the studies that were executed.

Songwriting is a well-documented technique in music therapy (Cordobes, 1997; Ficken, 1976; Freed, 1987; Jones, 2005). Silverman (2011) studied the effects of songwriting interventions on patients on an acute psychiatric unit. This evidence-based study designated eighty-nine patients to either an experimental music therapy group or a psychoeducational control group. “Music Therapy for Children and Adolescents with Behavioural and Emotional Problems: A Randomised Controlled Trial,” (Porter et al., 2017) examined the effects of music therapy on children and adolescents with emotional, behavioral, and developmental difficulties. The experimental group (MT group) utilized the technique of *‘Free Improvisation,’* (Bruscia, 1987), which encourages clients to create music and sound freely through voice, instrument, or movement while receiving support from their therapist. Overall, music therapy appeared to be very well received in comparison to other forms of therapy (Porter et al., 2017).

Felicity Baker, a pioneer in the use of songwriting as an effective MT intervention, has investigated songwriting on a global scale as part of her research (Baker, 2015). She and her colleagues (Baker et al., 2008) surveyed a diverse group of music therapists to study specific goal areas for songwriting, including developing self-confidence, self-esteem, decision-making, fantasies, emotions, and storytelling, all goals that were addressed in this project. It was determined that the most common goals of interventions across music therapists involved were externalizing thoughts, fantasies and emotions, choice and decision making, and developing a

sense of self. The telling of a client's story was more relevant in clients suffering from eating disorders, substance abuse, and trauma. Overall, the majority of clinical research in this area, that has been documented, has been with adults in a psychiatry setting.

Expressive therapies, such as songwriting, are beneficial due to the nonverbal, symbolic means of communication (Clendenon-Wallen, 1991). Songwriting interventions can be activities that revolve around musical and compositional skills, or they can use musical improvisation, which provide a nonverbal and nonthreatening means of disclosure and examination (Rogers, 1990). Ficken (1976) found songwriting to be an activity that could be internalized by the client, and could lead to improvement in socially acceptable behavior and group cohesiveness. Ficken also identified songwriting as a means for assessment. "Fill-in-the-blank" formats to create a structured "12-bar-blues" can measure a patient's progress and attitudes towards the future (p. 97).

Lindberg et al. (1995) discussed songwriting as a means for self-expression, increasing expression of feelings, and building self-esteem with an abused adolescent. Abusing a child or adolescent can lead to problems with sexuality, gender identity, low self-esteem, suicidal ideation, and potentially to promiscuity or prostitution. Kratus (2016) further advocates for the implementation of songwriting classes in a school setting. Although songwriting has been taught for decades by music therapists, it has not been widely embraced in the school music curriculum (Kratus, 2016). Songwriting relieves tension and stress, and it helps develop individual and social identities. It can build emotional stability, self-expression, and self-discovery.

Kratus (2016) develops the process of songwriting in a high school setting by explaining the importance of a safe and supportive environment, from both the teacher and the students. This is crucial for students expressing personal feelings, family issues, or any other

uncomfortable subject matter. The author also explains how the teacher must facilitate supportive feedback within the group. A sense of security and trust within the group will benefit everyone when sharing their works.

Kinney (2012) studied songwriting at an afterschool community center, where students had an abundant amount of resources. The facility made rehearsal, teaching and practice studios readily available. Students also had access to GarageBand, a music recording software program. Kinney (2012) studied a 15-year-old boy named Christopher, a great candidate for the study because of his rough upbringing on “the streets” because “a street life context offers particular psychological and physical spaces that operate in tandem to produce a site of strength, community, and ultimately, resilience” (Payne & Gibson, 2009). Kinney (2012) set out to assess the role that songwriting as a means to resilience, plays in an individual like Christopher’s life.

Songwriting was beneficial to Christopher’s well-being (Kinney, 2012). It provided him with a means to navigate emotions that were caused by what he viewed as a betrayal, by peers and others, and by considering more self-preserving ways to interact with others (Kinney, 2012). His writings were very personal, exploring the death of his great-grandmother, his old brother’s imprisonment, and his father’s departure from the family when he was younger. He also wrote about reverting back to his prior self, before he allowed himself to care about what others thought. Songwriting helped Christopher work through, and ultimately cope with, emotions and experiences not available in other spaces.

Brunk (1990) called writing songs as a therapeutic intervention with a client “process songwriting” (p. 96). Process songwriting has been documented as effective in achieving a number of clinical goals, including increasing verbal communication (Edwards, 1998), increasing socialization and interaction among group members (Hilliard, 2001), identifying and

improving self-concept and self-esteem (Edgerton, 1990; Freed, 1987), increasing the expression of feelings (Cordobes, 1997; Kennelly, 2001; O'Callaghan, 1996), increasing a sense of cohesion among group members (Cordobes, 1997; Freed, 1987), and increasing coping skills, such as problem solving (Edgerton, 1990). Process songwriting is an effective technique for both individual and group therapy, and is a preferred intervention by certain clients (Gallagher & Steele, 2002).

There is no doubt that music therapy in the form of songwriting is a beneficial technique with various populations. The intervention thrives in both group sessions and 1:1 settings. Judging by these articles, the positive effects from songwriting are equally as noticeable in both art-based and evidence-based scenarios. This project addresses adolescents struggling with anxiety, depression, self-esteem and other emotions difficulties, and the literature explained here describes numerous examples.

Felicity Baker's (2015) research examined the development of self-confidence, self-esteem, decision-making, and emotion difficulties. The project described in this paper closely studies these behaviors, similarly to Lindberg's (1995) exploration of sexuality, and gender identity. "Therapeutic Songwriting in Music Therapy" (Baker, et al., 2008) investigated similar songwriting goals implemented with clients who suffered from eating disorders, substance abuse and trauma, similarly to the clients portrayed in this paper. Kinney (2012) portrayed a number of these issues in the study regarding Christopher, who dealt with betrayal, a difficult upbringing, and a father who left him at an early age. The literature reviewed for this project shows many parallels to the population being addressed. Kratus (2016) advocates for songwriting in a high school setting, stating that it relieves stress, helps develop identities and builds stability and self-

discovery. The songwriting that occurred over the course of this project explored these issues and addressed its benefits.

Method

For this project, I chose to develop a method, because I was very interested in the effect of songwriting on adolescents who struggle emotionally and behaviorally. Additionally, I was motivated to implement an intervention I had adapted, and modified for this population, from other activities I have observed in the field. The purpose of this project was to formulate a new method of therapeutic songwriting in a group setting. Goals included group cohesion, elevated mood, and facilitating those whom are non-musical to express themselves in a new way, through music. It was my hope that the activity designed for this project would be beneficial to the clients, and educate music therapists whom have yet to utilize this kind of practice in their experiences.

One important aspect to consider when facilitating music therapy interventions that require a lot of spontaneous creative contributions from group members was being aware of the various levels of musicality within the group. For example, one group member might have played an instrument in school their whole life; another member might have sang in the school, or church, choir; and others might not have had any musical background whatsoever. The latter would potentially show more resistance when prompted to contribute during the creative process.

The goal when working with non-musical clients, those who cannot sing or play an instrument, was facilitating a contained, safe space where they could express themselves without the pressures of having to be musical. The majority of the group encouraged creative writing, and group members were encouraged to share as much or as little as they felt comfortable. There was no added pressure of asking everyone to sing or play music. The group dynamic of the intervention promoted working together in order to accomplish similar goals.

Group songwriting had its benefits, but also came with some setbacks. On one hand, the group dynamic was encouraging and allowed for a good amount of teamwork and brainstorming. Conversely, a lot of clients became anxious sharing their feelings in front of others. At the site discussed, songwriting was solely group based.

The process I used included individual free write and review (a two-step process), introduction to group songwriting, group songwriting, integrating/setting words to music, and group singing. To begin the group, I prompted a free write by asking the group to come up with a topic that they would like to explore. At this point, they were unaware that the focus of the activity was songwriting. This was done intentionally to promote honest, uncensored writings. The clients were asked to write that word at the top of lined paper. This word should have represented how each client felt about the topic that was discussed. I, as the clinician, then played soothing chord progressions on guitar as the group engaged in a free-write.

The purpose of using soothing chord progressions was primarily to reduce anxiety while group members were writing. Some of the material that could have come up while writing could have been triggering or unsettling. The calming nature of the guitar was to support group members by decreasing potential stress and anxiety. Evans (2002), Pelletier (2004), and Nilsson (2008) have all shown that listening to music can be an effective means of alleviating state anxiety (see also, Elliot, Polman & McGregor, 2011).

While I strummed the guitar, group members were given five minutes to write. They were asked to write down as much as they could, as fast as they could, whatever came to mind. They were encouraged to not fixate on anything, and just let the words flow, continuing to write until the music stopped. I gave the group roughly five to six minutes to write, but sometimes I

pushed the time limit slightly if I saw that group members were still putting a lot of effort into the writing.

In the second phase of the intervention, I asked the group members to carefully read what they had written on their page. Again, I played soothing music on the guitar. The clients were then encouraged to underline or highlight words and phrases that they found interesting or were fond of. They could also cross out things that they did not like or made them feel uncomfortable. Again, they were given roughly five minutes for this task.

In the next phase of the intervention, I used a white board to begin the group songwriting process. I invited someone from the group to offer something they highlighted on their paper. This became the first line of the song. It was at this point, that I informed the group that we were engaging in a songwriting activity. Again, this was intentional so that their free writes were honest and organic.

The group members were then encouraged to each write a line of the song, taking turns. My goal was to get each group member to offer at least one line to contribute to the song. If they got stuck, or lacked the confidence to begin the song, sometimes I would offer up a line to encourage and inspire more content. After four lines were offered, I encouraged the group to write a chorus for the song. Sometimes writing the chorus was as simple as repeating words that represented the theme over and over again; other times the group felt more pressure to a chorus due to the fact that it is a very important part of a song. Writing lyrics can be difficult for some, but the objective was getting everyone to communicate and work together on a common goal.

Once the lyrics were completed, I picked up my guitar again, offering different chord progressions. I assumed, depending on the level of musicality of the group, this process would vary in difficulty from group to group. For groups lacking musical background, I prompted them

with basic questions to articulate an appropriate chord progression. I asked questions like: “Should the song be fast or slow?” “Should it be happy or sad?” “Do you want the song to be aggressive or more on the passive side?” Following the answers to these questions, I was able to come up with a chord progression that appropriately accompanied the lyrics.

Once a chord progression was decided on, I asked the group to come up with a melody for the lyrics. Again, the involvement would depend on musicality, and also, the confidence of group members. In some instances, a group member would volunteer to sing the entire song as I accompanied them on guitar. In other cases, no one offered to take on this role, so I would sing the lyrics myself. Singing in front of a group is a lot to ask of a group of this nature. My vocalization allowed group members to hear their work musically, as opposed to solely lyrically. Finally, I challenged the group as a whole to sing the song together.

Once the song was written, clients were encouraged to sing the lyrics together. This created an important sense of group cohesion, which promotes good social skills, positive behavioral skills. Even when singing about topics relating to pain and stress, the singing of songs can be viewed as fun and pleasurable (Edwards, 1998; Hilliard, 2001). Singing together can also facilitate rapport between therapists and clients (Goldstein, 1990; Kennelly, 2001). The unique composition, and combination, of music and words are useful for these, and other, therapeutic endeavors (Jones, 2006).

While some group members may challenge the therapist with their resistance, there are many ways to help them feel involved. The beauty of group songwriting is evident when the collaborative process aids those less likely to offer their ideas. The demands of the group members for verbal contributions for the song range from contributing a single word, adding

phrases to existing lines, to writing all of the lyrics (Fulford, 2002). Each group members' success is dependent upon the therapist's guidance in creating the song (Jones, 2005).

When resistance in songwriting occurs, much of the musical responsibility typically falls upon the music therapist. Developing an appropriate musical structure for the lyrics can be pertinent to the success of the process (Jones, 2005). Facilitating a successful songwriting session in this manner can be as effective and beneficial to the clients as if they were to write the song completely on their own.

The free-write segment of the intervention allowed everyone to be creative without the pressures of spontaneously contributing in front of peers. The idea was to let them work out their thoughts on paper, and then highlight words or phrases that they might have felt comfortable sharing, without pressure. This quickly built trust between client and therapist, which is extremely important, as these were single session groups. When group members felt comfortable in the space, they were more likely to participate.

Results

A large portion for tracking and analyzing my progress was utilizing the actual lyrics of the song. I was not able to record sessions because recording the session would require written consent from each group member, and from each parent and guardian, which would entail tracking down each parent days before a session, hoping that all would comply. Although this was not impossible, it would have quite a challenge getting all of the signatures in a timely manner, and was beyond the scope of this project. In this case, the risk did not outweigh the reward, and I chose to disregard the use of recordings and transcribed the lyrics in a journal at the end of each session.

The site where I introduced by method requires all clinicians to document group notes as a means to track progress for each individual. This is where I recorded detailed information on how clients responded to the activity, if they participated a lot, what resonated with them, and any other specifics on what was said. I later used these notes to assess their evolvment, and important pieces that transpired during the sessions.

In music therapy interventions, resistance can be prevalent in many individuals, especially in songwriting. Group members often feel incompetent or inferior to those who obtain talents that they do not, for example, playing guitar, or singing. However, over the duration of this project there were times where everything came together. Participation was strong, and resistance took a back seat.

At the beginning of this project, I led a songwriting group with six adolescents in a partial hospitalization program. I began the group with a deep breathing exercise. Then, as a group we came up with a few words that represented how the group was feeling in that moment. As the majority of the teens in the group came here for depression and anxiety, it took much prompting

to get any of them to speak. Some of the words that came up were, tired, relaxed, exhausted, and frustrated. Seeing the common theme in most of the words, as a group, we came up with the word '*calm*.' I then instructed the group to write the word at the top of lined paper. I asked them to think about that word and what it means to them.

I gave them five minutes for the free write, playing ambient music in the background, then asked them to finish the line they were working on and come back to the group. After briefly processing the experience they reread and reviewed their writing, highlighting interesting passages and crossing out those they did not like. After divulging to the group that we would be joining in a group songwriting experience, there were a few gasps, some sighs, and everyone had a shocked expression on their faces. I encouraged them to focus on the parts of the writing they highlighted and asked for someone to offer the first line of our song. After a few minutes, I decided that it might be best if I gave them a jumping off point. They agreed. I wrote at the top of the board, "Calm as the tides, still as the moon." With a starting point, it was much easier for them to contribute. As a group, they were able to add four more lines to the song. Also, they were able to take turns writing the lines, and created a rhyming scheme.

As we only had ten minutes left in the group, I quickly grabbed my guitar and offered two chord progressions. One of the progressions was major which sounded happy and playful, and the other progression was minor, which sounded sad or lower energy. One girl from the group stated that we should use the second option because it sounded minor to her, and that went better with the theme of our song. I then asked if anyone would be willing to create a melody for the song and sing it aloud. As I expected, no one volunteered and they asked me to do the singing. I did so, and everyone said that they were satisfied with how the song came out.

Considering that songwriting can be quite daunting to some, I found it very important to add the free write piece. Though it took up a lot of time, I am very confident that the content of the writing was vital to the songwriting portion of the group. As I explored and processed the final project, I saw that the group members were able to identify positive characteristics of things that make them calm, like the smell of raindrops and sunlight. They also identified feelings of peace and coping skills. One group member recognized through the songwriting that she is the only one who can defeat or inner beast. Overall, the product derived from the group was very positive and showed a lot about the group members involved.

About a month into the project, I met with a smaller group of three individuals, two girls and one boy, ages 14 to 17, for the songwriting group. One member of the group kept his head down, fidgeting, unless otherwise prompted, and even then, did not offer much. Another member, who typically had a lot to share, shut down when she realized the nature of the group. The third was my saving grace. Though her input did not represent the typical structure of a song, it was still poetic, honest, and quite intriguing.

The group was able to come up with a theme together for the activity. It was *clash*. The first two members of the group struggled with their personal free writes. The third member had plenty to write about, even continuing to write long past the sound of the timer. The song represented a girl who does not want to be a cliché. It suggested that everyone talks negatively about this girl, but she is still proud of who she is. The girl distances herself from the crowd, but she still wants a chance a love.

Through much prompting, I struggled getting all of the three group members to participate equally. Everyone offered at least one line of the song. However, the third group

member, who participated throughout the group, dominated the content of the group's final product.

One morning at the site, I was responsible for check in. This one client in particular, who suffers from Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and struggles with gender identity, was giving me a very hard time. I will be using the pronouns they, them, and their in reference to this client due to their gender identity confusion.

They did not want to be there, refusing to answer any of the check in questions, and continually cursed at me. As their behavior was completely inappropriate for the other group members, I asked another clinician to check in with them one to one. When this client came back, it was time for Expressive group, where I facilitated the songwriting intervention previously discussed for this project. The client refused to participate during the writing portion of the group, saying that they hated forced writing. They spent most of the duration of the group drawing, and spent 5-10 minutes in the quiet room. The quiet room at the site is a small empty room where clients can go to take space. When they returned, the other group members had created the lyrics for the song, and the guitar had been introduced. Seeing the instrument, the client became much more interested in what was happening. They stated that they could play piano, violin, and drums. Then they offered a chord progression, G minor – A minor – B minor. Since these three chords were in succession, I believe that they were trying to be silly. So, I made sure to add another chord to the end of it playing, G minor – A minor – B minor – A minor. They were very surprised at how good it sounded, which, I think, proved my theory of them being a bit silly when offering those chords. They then offered to write the chorus and began singing it to the group. It was an amazing transition to watch their behavior change from being aggressive and defiant, to actively participating and offering constructive input. There is

something about music that bridged our relationship so quickly. The power of music is significant when shared between people (Baker, 2015). It allowed me to connect with the group, and with this particular client, on a level that I thought would never be possible on that day. If music can play such an important role in bringing people together for a shared musical experience, they become part of something that is bigger than them (Ruud, 1997).

The following group that I was working with on this particular day was greatly ideal. Of the four members I was working with, one was a singer; one knew how to play guitar and ukulele, and another was learning how to play guitar. The fourth group member stated that he used to play drums, but was not good anymore. The particular boy struggled with the writing portion, but still found a way to participate.

The group members on this day struggled with depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation, and social phobias at school. The theme chosen was uplifting in nature. This allowed the group to be playful when creating the song. There was a lot of joking around and everyone was supporting each other's ideas. They exhibited a great sense of accomplishment when offering a line, especially if it rhymed with the previous line. Not all lines in a song have to rhyme, but isn't that what makes a song a song? Rhyming words at the end of phrases controls structure, and this phrase-end position takes on extra importance. Since there is usually a musical rest at the end of the phrase, creating an end to the melodic phrase as well, a melodic or harmonic signal usually will tell the listener what to expect next (Patterson, 1991). The element of expectation in a song makes it more desirable and satisfying to listen to.

One group member requested if he could play the guitar while the writing was happening. What was played was very supportive to the others, and he continued to play until the entire song was written. Another group member, who did not share much until this point, expressed to me at

an earlier time that she was a singer. Despite her lack of participation, and that her head was down on the table, I encouraged her to write a melody for the song the group had written. The live music of the guitar sparked something in her, and after a few minutes of the guitar being a support for the group, she began singing. She created a melody on the spot for the song. She even began improvising, offering more lyrics. This group member presented a huge transformation of mood from the beginning of the group to when live music was introduced.

There are a couple key points to address in the lyrics of these songs, and how they came to fruition. The characters in the song were traveling through the woods and found themselves heading towards “the hoods.” As a group, everyone immediately realized that that next line would be inappropriate, so it was decided that the characters should immediately turn around. I found it very interesting that everyone agreed to avoid the topic as it may offend another group member or simply be unsuitable.

Another interesting thing to point out is that the group chose to explore gender identity towards the end of the song, to create a twist in the story. The characters in the story both had female names, but the group decided that one of them would identify as male at the end of the song. This maturity that was displayed, the group cohesion throughout, and overall success of the writing, made for the most successful groups over the course of this project.

Discussion

I began songwriting before I could even play music. I would write all the time, but I longed for my words to be accompanied by music. When I was a senior in high school, my friend and I started a band so that we could explore these writings. I played bass, and he played guitar. We found a drummer from the school that we attended. Getting together and arranging my lyrics with music was so empowering. Reading my lyrics on a page was one thing, but hearing the drums, bass, and guitar behind them really brought the experience to life. When combining the music and lyrics together feelings arise that are sparked by melody, harmony, dynamic changes and the powers of the sounds of the instrumentation and of the voice.

I continued writing through college, where I studied music, but there was a void. I did not have the support of my peers, my band mates. Ultimately, I forced myself to learn guitar, to be able to accompany myself. I learned basic chord progressions, and without knowing any music theory at all, I could feel how to put together desirable harmonies.

I wrote songs about my experiences at college, the girls I met, the friendships I created, and it made those relationships so much more authentic and wonderful. Songwriting became my muse, my answer, and response to everything. Without songwriting, I would not have any other way to express myself.

Like a lot of expressive arts, resistance among teens occurs prominently during songwriting interventions, compared to other music therapy techniques. There are teens who are not musically inclined, and others that are too anxious to share in front of others. These barriers often hinder the therapeutic process and its goals.

Depression and anxiety played a major part in the songwriting groups that I conducted. Whether or not a child is typically outgoing, a good student who always participates in class, if

they are often not shy, when depression takes over, any of these characteristics diminish significantly. Symptoms of depression and anxiety are so powerful, that those affected suffer in ways that many people cannot understand. They have trouble doing day-to-day things, like going to work, showering, and even simply getting out of bed. Participating in a group where they might feel vulnerable can be extremely difficult.

Most of the adolescents involved in the interventions conducted for this project suffered from depression. This made for a very challenging undertaking. Gathering data from these participants was quite difficult in the beginning stages of the project.

Surprisingly, the beginning phase of the intervention was very difficult in many of the groups that were held during the time of this project. Typically, group members struggled to come up with a common theme with which they all agreed. On some occasions, themes were funny and playful. On other occasions, they explored deeper feelings, problems from their pasts, or concerns about their future. In one instance, the group agreed on a topic that revolved around depression. My first instinct was to contemplate whether or not to redirect into something more positive. Instead, I let them explore their depression. They are with us to work on themselves, so letting them process in a safe contained space felt more constructive. Ultimately, almost all of the groups chose a topic that facilitated them to be productive in one way or another, and group members were able to process something that was going on in their lives.

Group songwriting can be difficult for many reasons. Some people work better on their own. The end product may not be cohesive. In this case, time constraints may hinder creativity. This portion of the group was typically challenging for group members because sharing with the group left them more vulnerable than writing independently. In some cases, I had to offer the first line of the song, to get the ball rolling. In these cases, I would have to give more prompting

to the group members, by calling on them one by one. When someone was ‘stuck,’ I would encourage the group to come up with words that rhymed with the last word of the previous line. I also typically use this technique in my own songwriting practices.

Another common barrier that group members faced was that they thought their writings had nothing to do with what was already written on the board. Depending on who the clients were, I might say to them, that maybe it does not seem like that to you, but the group might have a different interpretation. Or, I might prompt that client to come up with something on the spot, using a word that rhymed with the end of the previous line. Sometimes acknowledging a sense of spontaneity helped generate improvisational material.

One of the goals addressed over the course of these interventions was to facilitate emotions that arose in clients and expressing them in a healthy way. Prompting a group member to share a line for a song that is already partially written, is less of a feat than asking them point blank how they feel about a certain topic. Moreover, words in the form of lyrics can be easier and less confrontational to handle than conversation, especially if they are thinking about, and wanting to share, difficult issues (Baker, 2005).

Songwriting has been recognized as a means of promoting a sense of community, as well as stimulating positive movements in society. Adolescents, especially those from marginalized groups, have found their “voices” through writing their own stories in afterschool programs, summer programs, and community-based literacy practices (Angela, 2012). For example, Harlem youths who were engaged in community-based writing were positioned to respond directly to public efforts to gentrify their neighborhood (Kinloch, 2010). Through writing about local issues that directly affected them, the youths become empowered by and engaged in social action and critique within their own communities.

Over the course of this project, numerous adolescents, both musical and non-musical, explored songwriting in a safe, contained space where they were able to express themselves in a way that was very unique to the site in which the project was carried out. Each group was distinctive in its own way. No group member repeated the intervention. Topics varied from funny to serious, open to personal, and expressive to vulnerable. Ultimately, most of the interventions accomplished an end product that represented the reflections of all group members.

While conducting my research, I studied many of the different disorders, difficulties and struggles that I would potentially face while conducting my intervention. While the site at which this intervention was carried out, serves mostly those suffering from depression and anxiety, I came across countless battles that clients were facing. At the level of care where we provide treatment, we encounter depression, anxiety, violent trauma, sexual trauma, gender identity, self-esteem, anger, eating disorders, and substance abuse.

I feel that the project I completed, accomplished a lot to potentially support the clinical practice of expressive therapies. The combination of therapeutic writing, songwriting, music and processing allows for the intervention to be utilized in a number of ways. The intervention could be used in a 1:1 setting. It could be explored in outpatient, where therapists and clients could work on one piece over the course of numerous weeks. Though I have created a specific formula for this intervention to be carried out, it can be modified in many ways.

I would also like to consider that idea of modifying the intervention. To begin, seeing as I found the choosing of a topic to be quite difficult in some instances, maybe the clinician could provide a topic. I could also see a music therapy warm up being created to encourage brainstorming of a topic. The free write made some clients uncomfortable. I would like to devise a plan to cater to these cases, or give them a different task that could be equally as

beneficial to the end product. Finally, when conducting the group songwriting, I would like to see more fluidity in this process. I believe that more guidelines on structure and rhyming patterns would create a product that clients would be proud of and more inclined to participate in the music and singing portion of the group, fulfilling one of the main goals, group cohesion.

Conclusion

What I found most interesting while conducting these groups, was the vast amounts of resistance that occurred at the beginning of the sessions, compared to the overall compliance and participation at the end. Deciding on a topic, at times, was the most difficult part of the experience, and the clients could not come up with a solid idea that they all agreed on. Also, if they came up with a topic with a negative connotation, for example depression, that set the mood for the entire group.

The free write prompt made the clients vulnerable, even when I conveyed that they did not have to share if they did not want to. Like anything else, some thrived during this part of the group, and others did not. Those resistant to the free write either sat in silence, wrote down on line, or became disruptive. Not participating here hindered them from being able to participate later, during the group songwriting.

Various results came from the group songwriting. During a few groups that I conducted, the clients each came up with a line for the song, one after another. This was the ideal outcome. Other times I would have to offer a first line, to get things going. Many times, one of the group members would dominate the group by writing most of the song themselves, because no one else felt comfortable sharing.

After the lyrics were completed, I would hope that someone in the group knew how to play guitar and would compose the music for the song. Unfortunately, this only happened one

time. However, when it became time to create a melody, I have had many groups that had clients who felt comfortable singing. After the song was sung, the other group member was always very receptive to the singing and would always compliment the singer of the group. The group cohesion that always transpired at the end of these groups made all of the struggles and resistance worth it.

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